DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 364 910 CS 214 150

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TITLE Gertrude Buck's Theory of Discourse: A New Historical Perspective.
PUB DATE 1 Apr 93
NOTE 22p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the Conference on College Composition and Communication (44th, San Diego, CA, March 31-April 3, 1993).
PUB TYPE Speeches/Conference Papers (150) -- Historical Materials (060) -- Reports - Evaluative/Feasibility (142)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Case Studies; Educational History; *Higher Education; Institutional Characteristics; *Rhetoric; *Rhetorical Theory; Social Influences; *Writing Instruction; Writing Research
IDENTIFIERS *Buck (Gertrude); Composition Theory; Historical Background

ABSTRACT

An examination of the grammatical, rhetorical, and composition theories of Gertrude Buck (associate professor of English at Vassar College from 1897 to 1922) testifies to her rebellion against the current-traditional rhetorical tradition. Perhaps most remarkable about her writing is its emergence during a historical period that was witnessing an eclipse in rhetorical theory and a shift in the social function of American colleges toward an emphasis on providing opportunities for individual advancement. Buck's theory of discourse, viewed as rebelling against the perceived institutional need to "certify" a new community of middle class scholars, was the product of social forces at a particular historical juncture. Her progressive doctrine failed to find fertile ground in the discipline of composition and rhetoric; it withered in relative obscurity for many decades. Gertrude Buck's theory of discourse provides a case study of the powerful role that institutional priorities play in shaping pedagogical theories and practice. (Contains 28 references.) (RS)

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Conference on College Composition
San Diego, CA
April 1, 1993

Gertrude Buck's Theory of Discourse:

A New Historical Perspective

> It seems the invariable tendency of any complicated system of linguistic forms, when made a subject of study, to cut itself off from the living processes which gave rise to it, and become in the student's mind mere matter, an arbitrary thing-in-itself, dead and meaningless. (Brief English Grammar 3)

In the preface to her textbook, A Brief English Grammar, Gertrude Buck, Associate Professor of English at Vassar College from 1897-1922, launched a concerted attack against the mechanistic, reductive rhetorical theories of her day. In fact, she devoted her career as a teacher and scholar to campaigning against a rhetorical theory which she characterized as "disinterestedly scientific," and which she claimed consisted largely of "an empirical formulae unrelated to . . . any principle of modern psychology" ("What does Rhetoric Mean?" 197-198). Albert Kitzhaber commends Buck's efforts as "unusually and commendably independent," noting that she wrote during a period that was "becoming steadily more isolated from other fields of knowledge" (186).

Indeed, Buck presented a remarkably modern view of language as an organic, dynamic entity. Moreover, she revealed a startlingly contemporary attitude in her appeal for reforms in grammar instruction, for a process-approach to writing, and for topics that engage students in practical ways. However, what

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seems to intrigue and puzzle the handful of scholars who study Buck's writings is not only the progressive character of her ideas but the mysterious disappearance of her doctrine from the American educational scene. Apparently, the seeds of Gertrude Buck's truly visionary ideas about written discourse failed to find fertile ground in the conservative context of current traditional rhetoric; her ideas fell into relative obscurity for over 85 years.

Some scholars have been content to merely comment on Buck's curious exit from rhetoric and composition. Rebecca Burke remarks that, "Buck disappeared from the American educational scene so swiftly that the event is quite puzzling" (7). Virginia Allen calls Buck, "a lost woman, whose significant contribution to a field of study has been forgotten or ignored" (141). Others, like Joann Louise Campbell, have offered possible explanations. Campbell argues that institutional constraints confined Buck's ideas to a limited context; although the English department where she worked was characterized as a harmonious, supportive, democratic community where the expression of new ideas based on current educational theories was strongly encouraged and rewarded, administrative conflicts, low pay, large class sizes, and heavy work loads conspired to contain the expression of Buck's ideas to this rather limited institutional context (86). Indeed, as Campbell documents, Buck was summarily silenced by a patriarchal administration that not only denied free discussion on issues concerning women's suffrage, but also perpetuated oppression of women by discouraging professional advancement of

female faculty members and by concentrating power in the hands of male department heads (182).

Indeed, Campbell's argument, which is based on considerable archival research at Vassar College, is persuasive. If we consider other institutional contexts, however, we learn that this apparent oppression was not entirely gender-specific. Even Campbell admits that Fred Newton Scott, who inspired and shared many of Buck's ideas, failed to measurably change the instructional practices of his day, in spite of his national involvement in organizations such as MLA and NCTE (186). Apparently, Buck and Newton belonged to a larger tradition, called the Reform tradition, which enjoyed a brief heyday at the close of the 19th century. Allen documents the demise of this tradition, noting "a brief encounter in the 1890's with freedom from writing by rule. . . was soon abandoned in favor of shorter lists of abstractions" (145). These abstractions, according to Kitzhaber, include the "unity-coherence-emphasis" and the "four modes of discourse" formula which became the organizing principle of textbooks and composition courses (152). Incredibly, these formulaic, mechanistic abstractions have displayed tenacious staying power through much of the twentieth century.

Why should these abstractions, with their mechanistic emphasis and their isolation from a social context, win out over the communicative rhetoric of the Reform tradition? How could such a wrongheaded conception continue to dominate our thinking about writing instruction for the better part of this century?

In responding to this question, I will reflect on Gertrude Buck's writings to argue that, while Buck's theory of discourse subverted the dominant ideological order of current traditional rhetoric, political structures worked to contain Buck's subversion and to ultimately perpetuate the dominant paradigm because it responded more compellingly to a perceived institutional need to teach "correct" written English to an exploding population of middle class students. As an individual agent, then, Buck was both enabled and constrained by social context: she exerted a certain resistance to ideological pressure by challenging the principles of current traditional rhetoric; however, her radical departure from this popular, mechanistic view of writing was ultimately contained by the "credentialing" function assumed by college institutions. Thus, I propose that Gertrude Buck's theory of discourse provides an excellent case study of the powerful role that institutional priorities play in shaping pedagogical theories and practice. I suggest that ideas or historical figures themselves do not construct rhetorical traditions; rather, institutions ultimately shape and control pedagogy.

To substantiate my claim, I will closely examine Gertrude Buck's periodical articles and books in an effort to establish that her grammatical, rhetorical, and composition theories constituted an active subversion of the dominant ideological order. I will show that her theories represented a radical departure from other late nineteenth century rhetoricians who adhered to a mechanistic view of writing. My explication of her

theory will also attempt to situate her writings within the context of the larger Reform tradition which ultimately failed because it did not effectively address the "credentialing" function assumed by college institutions during that period.

Gertrude Buck's Grammatical Theory

Gertrude Buck's grammatical theory represents no less than a concerted attack against the mechanistic, reductive grammatical theories of her day. Specifically, she makes a forceful, compelling argument against sentence diagramming, referring to this technique as "crystallized or fossilized thought structure" ("Psychology" 470). She contends that the diagram, with its mathematical formula of "subject + predicate = sentence.... misrepresents [grammatical] structure, as it is understood by the accredited psychology of the present day" ("Psychology" 471). Specifically, she disputes the notion that the sentence is a "definitely fixed and bounded thing. . . that can be chopped up into small pieces for rearrangement in a set pattern called the diagram" ("Sentence Diagram" 250). In a humorous vein, she suggests that this "manufacture hypothesis " of grammar lends itself to the following recipe:

> Mix together carefully one subject with several appropriate adjective modifiers. Then, beat up a verb with one or more adverbs and unite the two compounds, thickening them with prepositions and conjunctions. Season to taste with interjections and garnish delicately with articles. ("Psychological" 271)

This conception of grammar as an inorganic compound prompted Buck to conduct a survey to determine the impact of such a notion on her students' attitudes toward language. Buck found a mechanical

conception of language structure clearly ingrained in their thinking. Her students reported that they imagined a sentence "in the form of a train of cars" or "square wooden blocks strung along in a line" or "like squares ruled off on paper and fitted together somehow. . . as a puzzle" or "like a square of crazy patchwork" ("Foundations" 481-482). Buck argues, therefore, that we should replace our mechanical conception of language structure with one that is based on "the notion of language function" ("Foundations" 484). She proposes that we begin to conceive of the sentence as a "living, growing thing... organic in structure, [which] cannot be conveyed or represented by a lifeless, static, artificial construction" ("Make-Believe" 25). Buck likens this organic perspective to the evolutionary hypotheses of biology which sees the animal as evolving by successive differentiations out of "a single drop of jelly-like protoplasm." In the same way, Buck posits a "psychological protoplasm" which emerges into human consciousness in an embryonic manner ("Psychological" 270).

Buck contends that human thought emerges first from a "vague, undifferentiated feeling" ("Sentence Diagram" 253). She provides the example of a child who cuts himself while whittling, and who utters the interjection, "Ouch!" In the next instant, the child exclaims "I tell you that hurt!" This child's thought, she explains, emerges first from a confused feeling of pain and then quickly divides into two main branches---the recognition of the chief agent of the pain (self) and the action which produced the pain (cutting). ("Sentence Diagram" 252-254). In the same way, Buck proposes, sentences develop from "a nebulous, ill-

defined consciousness of a state of things into a two-branched thought of the agent of that state of things and its method of action" ("Sentence Diagram" 255). The expression of this two-branched thought is the subject (agent) and the predicate (action) which further subdivides into clauses, phrases, and finally into words ("Sentence Diagram" 258).

Buck consistently describes the structure of sentences in metaphorical terms. She likens sentence development to an "unfolding amoeba. . . one homogeneous jelly-like mass of protoplasm, wherein lay the promise and potency of a developed creature" ("Sentence Diagram" 258-259). She admits, however, that the amoeba diagram, which she provides as a figure in the text of her article, "would not carry us very far. As the subject branches, and the predicate in its turn begins to divide, the amoeba must be abandoned for a more highly developed structure, such as that of the tree" ("Sentence Diagram" 258-259). Thus, Buck postulates an organic structure of language" which she claims has been "long familiar to students of philosophy and linguistics" and which clearly identifies her work with the competing Reform tradition (Buck and Scott 3). Moreover, she structures her textbook, A Brief English Grammar, in a manner consistent with her grammatical theory. She titles Chapter 1, "How the Sentence Grows" and then examines how the subject and predicate "grow" in subsequent chapters. True to her beliefs about successive differentiation, she then treats the prepositional phrase, the clause, and finally the parts of speech. (5-10).

Buck makes several other remarkably modern points about language in this textbook. First, she professes the idea that language form is deeply influenced by language function (3). This belief sounds remarkably like the current practice of defining grammar in terms of language function rather than language structure. Furthermore, she expresses the idea that a grammar should be descriptive rather than prescriptive. She remarks, "'Grammar does not say to us directly 'You must speak thus and so,' but only 'English people at the present time do speak thus and so.'" (13). Buck suggests, also, that written language has its basis in spoken language. (11). In addition, she notes that children have a functional, unconscious mastery of the language long before they embark on a formal, conscious study of its grammar. She observes, "The English speaking student already knows something about this system in a practical way, having learned in childhood to understand the speech of his family and friends." Such beliefs are consistent with current language acquisition theory.

Thus, in examining Buck's grammatical theory, it is readily apparent that she envisioned written discourse in ways that differed markedly from the more popular current-traditional rhetorical tradition. In a positive rebellion against such a mechanistic view of language pedagogy, Buck's grounds her grammatical theory in the competing Reform tradition. This tradition's pedagogy was centrally concerned with how the student (as organism) functions within the educational environment, assimilating and expressing ideas in accordance with his or her

needs, interests, habits, and ideals (Woods 28). Its frequent reference to organic growth metaphors-- whereby thought branches out, bears fruit, and needs to be pruned--emphasized appeals to the student's own interests, and a definition of thinking and writing as constructive, social activities. Further evidence of this progressive doctrine appears in books and periodical articles that outline Buck's rhetorical theory. Let's turn now to her rhetorical theory which also provides evidence of a radically subversive doctrine.

Gertrude Buck's Rhetorical Theory

Like her grammatical theory, Gertrude Buck's rhetorical theory is firmly the Reform tradition's pedagogy. One of the earliest indications of this organic perspective is her doctoral dissertation, "Metaphor--A Study in the Psychology of Rhetoric" written under Fred Newton Scott at the University of Michigan in 1899. In this work, she counters the notion of the metaphor as a mechanical device "like a box, whose parts, gathered from different sources are put together to make the whole" (qtd. in Kitzhaber 183). She posits, rather, a conception of the metaphor as a "biologic organism" (qtd. in Kitzhaber 180), developing out of undifferentiated language into a clearly differentiated structure (Stewart, "Nineteenth Century" 160). The poetic metaphor, in Buck's view, is "the result of a vital process, more like a plant or an animal, whose members grow from the same source, out of a homogeneous mass into a clearly differentiated structure" (qtd. in Kitzhaber 183). Thus, the metaphor, to Buck's way of thinking, is not simply a mechanical joining of disparate

objects; rather, it is a psychological process of differentiation in which a single perception divides like an amoeba into two discernible entities (Mulderig 96). Buck concludes, therefore, that the metaphor is "not compounded like a prescription with intent to produce a certain effect upon the person who swallows it; but it springs spontaneously out of a genuine thought-process. . . It is no artificial, manufactured product, but a real organism, living, growing, and dying" (qtd. in Mulderig 96).

Mulderig notes that Buck's attack on the artificial separation between style and substance is very modern (96). Kitzhaber concurs with this assessment, observing that her work must be "distinguished sharply from all previous discussions of the subject by an attempt to use the data of experimental psychology in shedding light on the origin, nature, and use of this figure (180). Kitzhaber also compliments her effort to draw on pertinent information from other, related disciplines and, in so doing, deserves credit for "her courage in brushing away the accumulated dust of well over two thousand years" (186).

In her periodical articles, Buck explicitly describes her rhetorical theory. Defining rhetoric as "the science or theory of the process of communication by language," she argues against a conception of rhetorical theory which is "disinterestedly scientific" and which consists largely of a "mass of empirical formulae unrelated to. . . any principle of modern psychology" ("What does 'Rhetoric' Mean?" 197-198). Interestingly enough, in establishing a psychological basis for the study of rhetoric, Buck finds a common meeting ground between literary criticism and

rhetoric. She observes that their apparent similarity in material and method offers both a meeting ground and opportunity for mutual reinforcement ("What does 'Rhetoric' Mean?" 199).

In her article, "The Present Status of Rhetorical Theory," Buck further spells out the communicative aspect of her rhetorical theory. She opposes the Sophistic theory of discourse whereby the speaker seeks to persuade the hearer because he recognizes some advantage to himself (168). She attacks such a theory, calling it "anti-social" and "exclusively individual" because it "leaves a gap in the chain of communication between the minds of the speaker and hearer" (169-170). Buck proposes a "social theory of rhetoric" which she claims originates in Platonic thought and which involves "persuasion to the truth...[which] advantages both [the hearer] and the speaker as well" (171). Buck contends that this placing of the speaker and hearer on equal footing results in "the complete closing of the circuit of communication between the speaker and hearer" (174). Although Buck playfully observes that "we are not now-a-days on such joyfully intimate terms with absolute truth as was Plato" (172), she concludes that the only legitimate aim of rhetoric is "persuasion, but not persuasion to any belief the speaker pleases, rather it is persuasion to the truth, knowledge of which. . . ultimately advantages both [the hearer] and the speaker" (171).

We also find Buck's communicative emphasis articulated in her textbook, A Course in Argumentative Writing which defines argument as "the act of establishing in the mind of another

person a conclusion which has become fixed in your own, by means of setting up in the other person's mind the train of thought or reasoning which has previously led you to this conclusion" (3). The process of argumentation, Buck proposes, is based on three "articles of faith". First, rather than have students rely on formulaic rules of logic which she characterizes as "the dead products of other people's thought," Buck advises the teacher to have students depend on their own first-hand observation and thought and a combination of both inductive and deductive reasoning (iv). Second, she recommends using topics which engages students in practical ways; the "material used for analysis should be not remote from the student's natural interests, but interwoven with his daily experiences" (iv). Finally, she expresses the conviction that teachers should have students seek the logical basis of their arguments in psychology. She complains that "cut off from its deepest roots, logic has come to seem rather like a dead tool than a living expression of thought" (v). Therefore, she counsels teachers to have students make each argument refer to their logical and psychological antecedents so that the maxims and formulae, "usually regarded by the learner as malign inventions of Aristotle", more closely resemble the way people really think" (v).

Thus, a close examination of Gertrude Buck's rhetorical theory reveals once again that her progressive, communicative doctrine provides a stark contrast to the more conservative, mechanistic character of current-traditional rhetoric. In this way, Buck aligns her ideas with the precepts of the Reform

tradition. A look at her composition theory will provide a final piece of evidence that Buck's theories represent a radical subversion of the dominant ideological order of current traditional rhetoric.

Gertrude Buck's Composition Theory

Gertrude Buck's composition theory represents perhaps the most practical application of the Reform tradition's pedagogy in its reference to compositions as "organic wholes," and to the writer as "an individual whose efforts at "self-expression" are called forth by appeals to his or her own interests." (Wood 28).

In this spirit, Buck proposes the first tenet of her composition theory which advises writing for a genuine purpose. She suggests that composition teachers " derive subjects for writing from the student's own experience, rather than from sources foreign to his knowledge or interest" (371) because a student writes better when "he has a real occasion for writing than when he composes an exercise to exemplify some rule for composition (372)". In fact, Buck renders a harsh criticism against such rule-governed practices. She declares that,

> even if thoroly [sic] indoctrinated with rhetorical formulae, the average student is conscious of no particular desire to 'produce an effect of vivacity' on some unspecified and unimagined audience. He feels no insatiable longing to compose a paragraph which shall have unity, coherence and proportion. ("Recent Tendencies" 376)

Thus, in a veritable "revolt against formal rhetorical precepts," Buck recommends that teachers "abolish all writing by rule" and "cast off the yoke of formal rhetoric" ("Recent Tendencies" 371-372). Buck recommends, instead, that teachers simply "let the

student write, the oftener the better. It is by writing that writing is learned" ("Recent Tendencies" 372).

Buck then goes on to propose the second tenet of her composition theory which acknowledges the importance of writing for a specific audience. She advises teachers "to direct the student's writing to some real audience" ("Recent Tendencies" 371). She observes that "the average schoolboy has nothing to say to anybody about 'Pereunt et impuntantur' (the vice of ambition) or 'Autumn thoughts.' If left to himself, he would never voluntarily write a word on such a subject" ("Recent Tendencies" 373). Thus, she suggests that teachers provide a motive for "having something to say which another person wishes or needs to hear" ("Recent Tendencies" 373).

Buck's third tenet suggests a new standard for evaluating writing which is remarkably consistent with modern, reader-response techniques. Her purpose is "to criticize... [the student's] writing somewhat informally, in terms of the ultimate end of discourse, rather than by the direct application to it of prescriptive rules for composition" ("Recent Tendencies" 371). She endorses a system which replaces formal standards of evaluating writing with a "practical standard for criticism"; she recommends that the writer evaluate her own writing by asking questions such as "Did I succeed in reproducing my experience exactly in my friend's mind? Did he receive from me the sensation I had previously felt? Did he see each event as it had passed before my eyes? Did he think my thought after me? Did he reach my conclusion as I had earlier reached it?" ("Recent

Tendencies" 380-381). Interestingly enough, she apparently endorses our modern notions about peer response as a component of any evaluation scheme. For instance, she suggests that the reader sketch a scene described by the writer or provide a verbal account of the image described by the writer as a way of measuring "whether or not...[the writer's] communication reached home" ("Recent Tendencies" 381). She admits that, at that time, her standards of evaluation were only "rough and ready practical judgements", but she anticipates later "a body of practical formulae" ("Recent Tendencies" 381).

Buck apparently attempted to articulate her evaluation standards in her article, "Marks in Freshman English" printed in The Vassar Micellany News. She lists four major criteria for evaluating student writing:

1. the ability to grasp an author's ideas through reading
2. the ability to use those ideas constructively
3. the effectiveness of transmitting the results through writing
4. and, the ability to judge his own efforts or effectiveness in communications (qtd. in Burke 17).

In the preface to her book, A Course in Expository Writing, Buck reiterates these same basic tenets. In later chapters, she returns to her earlier discussions pertaining to the psychology of sensory perception. In the same way that the sentence unfolds from a vague, undifferentiated feeling into two-branched thought, Buck contends that a description of an experience "proceeds from the vague to the definite, from the general to the detailed, and the impressiveness of the description lies in the accuracy with which the writer has recognized the character and value of the

different stages in perception" (11). Buck argues that such descriptions have heuristic power, helping us "to come to a clearer and fuller realization of the meaning of. . . the world around us" (56). Further, when we begin to "convey our sense of the meaning of the impression. . . when the description subserves an interpretative purpose, we call it expository" (63).

Thus, an investigation of Buck's composition theory provides a final piece of convincing and practical evidence of her theoretical alignment with the Reform tradition and her rebellion against the more popular current-traditional rhetoric.

Conclusion

The foregoing review of Buck's grammatical, rhetorical, and composition theories testifies to her rebellion against the current-traditional rhetorical tradition. This investigation also provides a persuasive argument for situating her work within the competing Reform tradition. What is perhaps most remarkable, however, about Gertrude Buck's writing is its emergence during a historical period that was witnessing a veritable eclipse in rhetorical theory. Virginia Allen documents this decline, remarking, "the last half of the nineteenth century is among the most dismal and authoritarian periods in the history of Western rhetoric" (142). S. Michael Halloran concurs with this assessment, noting that "with the exceptions of Fred Newton Scott and Gertrude Buck, the late nineteenth-century American rhetoricians have been uniformly regarded as simplistic [and] derivative, worthy of attention only as examples of how not to teach writing" ("Teaching" 172). Halloran attributes this lack

of innovation in rhetorical theory to the emergence of the concept of belles lettres in American colleges, the steady specialization of knowledge and the curriculum, and the profound shift of the social function of American colleges toward an emphasis on providing opportunities for individual advancement ("Decline" 262).

Donald Stewart also observes this trend, noting that colleges during the latter part of the nineteenth century were besieged by increasing enrollments and increasing numbers of students who wrote poorly ("Status" 734). At the same time, Halloran points out, writing "correctly" was taking on greater importance as a sign of membership in a competitive, middle-class society ("Nineteenth" 167). This increasingly competitive social spirit, Halloran notes, imposed a "credentialing" function on schools ("Nineteenth" 166).

Thus, Buck's theory of discourse, which emerged at time that Virginia Allen has described as "the most dismal and authoritarian period in the history of Western rhetoric (142)," may be viewed as historically and socially situated. In its rebellion against the perceived institutional need to "certify" a new community of middle class scholars, it may be seen as the product of social forces at a particular historical juncture (Howard 23). Indeed, Gertrude Buck's writing "resonates" with the complex, dynamic cultural forces from which it emerged. (Greenblatt 89).

Viewed in this way, we can better account for Buck's writings as a previously marginalized theory of discourse that

has been both enabled and constrained by social context. Specifically, the new historical concept of individual agency helps to clarify the reasons for Gertrude Buck's mysterious disappearance from the American educational scene. As an "agent," Buck exerted a certain resistance to ideological pressure. Indeed, she launched a revolt against ideological consolidation--the process by which the dominant order seeks to perpetuate itself (Dollimore 10). Rather than constrain and contain her, however, socio-cultural forces conspired to permit Gertrude Buck an exercise of her will as independent, individual agent. She was propelled forward by social circumstance into an active subversion of the dominant ideological order. She was allowed, as Stephen Greenblatt puts it, to "co-exist" with this ideological order without being "swept up in its gravitational pull" (qtd. in Pease 121).

Nevertheless, Buck's radical subversion of was ultimately contained by the dominant ideological order of current traditional rhetoric. Her progressive doctrine failed to find fertile ground in the discipline of composition and rhetoric; it withered in relative obscurity for many decades. In new historical terms, this curious disappearance may be read as an act of containment--a process by which "certain . . . political structures contain the subversive perceptions they generate. (Greenblatt 76). That is, Buck's subversion was ultimately contained by the college institutional structures because it did not respond compellingly to the perceived institutional need to teach "correct" written English to a new community of middle

class scholars. As an individual agent, then, Buck was both enabled and constrained by social context: she exerted a certain resistance to ideological pressure by challenging the principles of current traditional rhetoric; however, her radical departure from this popular, mechanistic view of writing was ultimately contained by the "credentialing" function assumed by college institutions.

Thus, Gertrude Buck's theory of discourse provides an excellent case study of the powerful role that institutional priorities play in shaping pedagogical theories and practice. It would seem that ideas or historical figures themselves do not construct rhetorical traditions; rather, institutions ultimately shape and control pedagogy. As Michel Foucault reminds us, it is the institution itself that provides us with the authority to speak. (1136).

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